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FIRST COTTON

by S. Ray Granade

9/8/2009

As a boy, I rode a bicycle all over Evergreen, Alabama. I could go anywhere, though a few places (particularly the “black sections”) created a bit of anxiety on occasion. The only restriction my parents imposed was that I not ride after dark, for the bike had no fenders (and thus no lights or reflectors of any kind). It was not unusual for me to ride across town to visit a friend and cover several miles at a time. The sturdy bike’s large, knobby, heavy-duty tires made every terrain accessible in an era before anyone used the designation “trail bike.”

In my world, a boy expected to find a way to make some money. Growing up in the South in the 1950s was part of it, growing up in the rural South was part of it, growing up in a preacher’s household was part of it, and growing up among people with a good work ethic was part of it. So, impelled by philosophy, culture, and necessity, I joined the ranks of the partially employed. At nothing did I make much money, but it was important to make some and make some that I could call my own, without feeling constrained about how I spent it. Spending was never a problem, for I never bought much; frugality was a way of life. But I loved collecting coins and accumulating comic books. The coins never cost much, for I would go down to the bank with a roll of pennies and they’d give me an empty desk and I’d go through the rolls of pennies from each teller in turn, replacing treasures if I found any. Comic books were another matter entirely; I had to buy those. They weren’t a real collection, for condition wasn’t important; I just got them in sequence to read and enjoy again and again.

In the course of my youth, I cut grass and worked for a small appliance repairman, but the task I remember most vividly caused me to purchase a large basket for my bicycle. Each day I would fill that basket with copies of the *Mobile Register* and pedal a paper route that covered Bruner and Magnolia Avenues and Pecan Street, getting there from East Front street via Mill and then Bellville streets, including the cross streets between and the off-shoots from each.

The *Register* was an afternoon paper, so it fit my delivery-time needs well. It wasn’t quite as much fun to get up early on a Sunday morning to receive and deliver the *Mobile Press-Register*, the combined Sunday edition of the two Mobile papers, but that was part of the job. I well remember delivering papers in the rain, with a plastic sheet over the basket to keep the papers dry. Once an unexpected shower came up and I had no plastic, only the protection that one afternoon paper gave the rest. When I made my last delivery, the men were waiting for them sitting on the porch of a duplex on Pecan down toward the street’s southern end. I walked up on the porch with the two papers, asked if one of them would be willing to take a wet paper or whether I’d need to go back and try to get a dry one. It was an awkward moment for me, as my actions attested. One fellow said he’d be glad to take a wet one; I gave him the dry one and headed off as they exchanged papers behind me!

Newspaper delivery was sub-contractor work. I worked for Dickey Bozeman, whom the newspaper paid to deliver the papers, and he paid me a few cents per paper. It wasn’t much money, but it was regular and did lead to my one experience picking cotton.

In my youth, cotton was losing out in Conecuh County to the Soil Bank as many landowners “rented” their land to a government program to subsidize farming indirectly by taking the land out of regular production, thereby artificially inflating prices of agricultural products (in our area that meant cotton and corn). Those willing to commit to an arrangement longer than a year could plant pines—available from the County Extension Service free of charge—and draw a government stipend while waiting for the trees to grow to pulpwood or saw-log size.

The program was so popular that a local black entrepreneur named Willie Rogers kept a tree-planting crew and supply of dibbles ready in addition to making the best barbecue around. People usually hired him to plant forty-acre fields, which he could do pretty quickly. Daddy hired Willie's crew once, and I marveled at their ability to work in pairs. One person stuck in the dibble and made a hole, another positioned the pine seedling as the dibble came out, then the dibbler stuck in the dibble behind the first "cut" and shoved the dibble forward, surrounding the seedling with dirt. I'd planted some myself and found it laboriously slow and back-breaking work. They seemed to fly across the field, proceeding in a line stretching from one side to the other, marching forward in unison with each pair producing a line of planted seedlings as straight as one could have laid out with a string or sight-glass. They did it in conversation sometimes, but never with vocal or rhythmic accompaniment.

Despite the encroachments of pine forests and government programs, some farmers held out. Some raised a little corn for their own use to eat personally, feed to livestock, and sell in small units to interested parties. A few raised corn to turn into moonshine, mostly in the county's southern part; we always believed that Nymph was the bootlegging capitol of Conecuh County, if not of the whole southern part of the state. The sheriff was always pretty good about busting up enough stills to keep the locals happy with the news while not molesting a few families who, through generations, raised corn for illicit purposes. Perhaps it was the simple answer to living in a dry county. Those who wanted to drink something alcoholic and were wealthy enough could drive to the next "wet" county and buy what they wanted. Those poor enough slaked their thirst with moonshine. Of course, when outsiders moved onto a farm to raise corn and then bought large quantities of sugar, the sheriff visited them with judicious timing that always resulted in a newspaper article on another still getting wrecked. I was never sure how often that resulted from the law-abiding zeal of locals and how often from the desire to "take care" of outsiders who wanted to compete with locals. I'll never forget the large underground operation in Beat One (the northern part of the county) run by city folks who assumed that rural locals were too dense to smell what was going on, or recognize that they bought corn as well as sugar locally and in large quantities.

Most farmers chose to raise cotton from long association and generations of handed-down experience. Enough did so to keep the local gin busy. It sat just to the west of the railroad tracks where North Main Street crossed them in the triangle between it and Salter. Oriented generally at right angles to the tracks with the baled product sitting on a dock at its east end near the railroad, it always heralded fall's arrival with a high-pitched whine that reached down the tracks as far as town. At first the whine occurred only during the day. As picking moved into high gear and the days lengthened, the whine lasted longer and longer. Soon we arose to its music and retired before it ended in the evening. As cotton wagons backed up and the huge suction tube lifted the white bolls into the gin's hungry maw, it sometimes seemed never to stop.

On my paper route, to the west of Pecan Street and immediately north of Avenue A, sat a small farm around which town had grown. I don't even remember the owner's name, but I do remember his claim to fame. He always had the county's earliest cotton crop, bringing it in about the time that school started in early September. In an era when most farmers had switched from manual to mechanical labor to harvest their crop, this fellow still honored the old ways.

As that summer progressed, I watched his cotton plants move inexorably from small green shoots to low bushes that then put on green bolls in which to cradle the cotton. The farmer tended the shoots, as he would collect the harvest, manually. Like all farmers, he would talk weather with me when I delivered his paper, hoping for rain or dry as the particular point in the growing season required. I watched the plants darken and the bolls open to reveal the white treasure they had guarded and nurtured unseen. Then, one Friday soon after school started, he stopped me for a

different reason: "I'm goin' to be pickin' cotton Saturday. Wanna make a little extra money and pick some?"

Though I was familiar with hoes and rakes and shovels and growing all sorts of crops, my familiarity with crops was only gleaned scientifically, by observation. I'd used the various implements on occasion and seemed to have a knack for them, and though I'd planted trees and grubbed stumps, I'd never planted or harvested a crop. I knew that everyone who farmed (as opposed to gardening) pulled corn mechanically. My grandfather, the one I called Papa Ray, had told me stories of picking cotton. He was short (I remember my pride when my height overtopped his), with small hands, and, at least as he told it, very good at picking cotton. Although the weather remained hot (but early fall, not summer, hot), the weekend was open to making some money and I was willing. He said to be there early the next morning.

I know that I got up early and got a good breakfast (probably the usual of eggs and bacon and toast), then peddled the couple of miles to his house. There were only three of us, and I was the only white one as well as the only male. I was also, as an early teenager, perhaps the youngest. He gave each of us a cotton sack. The two black pickers went immediately to work; I admitted my lack of experience and got minimal instruction before beginning.

The farmer showed me how to put my head and one arm through the sack's sling, and how to let it trail behind me. He recommended putting it on my right side, which I did. Then he pointed out how to stick my thumb and first three fingers, held as if I were gingerly holding something delicate for inspection, into the boll, grasp the cotton, and pull it out. I did that a time or two, then stuffed what I had pulled into my sack with my right hand while reaching forward with my left. He started me on my own row heading west, away from the sun. So, with my back to Pecan Street, I started picking cotton.

Despite my short stature, I still had to bend beyond horizontal to find and pull the cotton. Papa Ray had told me that there were two tricks to picking cotton: getting fingers into the boll and getting the whole process into a rhythm. My fingers, like his, were short; but mine were fatter. I reached into the open and desiccated bolls and grabbed the cotton at the seed's base, or as near it as I could. What no one had bothered to tell me was that successful pickers gave the cotton a slight twist to break seed from boll. I pulled straight out. I couldn't seem to master the knack of reaching in with one hand, then directing my eyes toward the next boll as I extracted the cotton from the first. One could say I had no rhythm. None of us sang, though the others might have had a song in their minds. I certainly did not.

Experience may be a great teacher, but I was a slow learner. Time stood still as the sun got higher and hotter. I seemed as rooted in place as the cotton plants. I looked at a boll to my right, thrust my hand down and fingers in, pulling out. I looked for another boll to my left, holding the cotton in my right hand while I thrust my left in and pulled out the cotton. I slapped the newly pulled cotton into my right hand and thrust the treasure into my sack before reaching out, again, with my right hand into a new boll. Over and over I repeated that same awkward process, boll by boll. The sack felt heavy as I dragged it along the ground, but when I straightened up to stretch my back on occasion (what felt like an eternity between stretches was probably only about ten or fifteen minutes), I'd pick it up only to find a dishearteningly small amount. It seemed like forever before I'd stuffed enough cotton into the sack to even make the bottom round out, much less bulge.

The farmer told us to feel free to get water from his well. Each time we could leave our sack in place, come over to his well, and drink from the bucket with a dipper. The water was good and reasonably cool, particularly as the day got hotter. I felt like I had somehow dropped into another time, though, for moving down that row of cotton came to remind me of our trips out west. Things that appeared quite near would take quite a while to reach. So it was with my row. The other two pickers lapped me once, then twice. As they did, my row seemed to remain the same

length, if not grow. When I stood, it still appeared as if I had made no progress. Looking behind told me that I was still dishearteningly near Pecan Street.

The farmer's house was about halfway down the field. By noon, I'd made it even with his house. My fellow pickers had finished two rows each. I had about a fourth of a sack; they had already emptied theirs once. At day's end, I had maybe a half a sack of cotton. The farmer hung the sack on an old-fashioned scale hook. I don't remember how much weight I'd picked, but I will never forget that my pay consisted of silver, with no paper. He kindly paid me a little extra, but it still wasn't much for a day's sweating in the hot sun.

It would be easy to repeat the mantra I heard from my father and always offered my sons: "This builds character!" And obviously I remember that incident about a half-century later, though I don't know how much character it built. Most significantly, I think, if nothing else in my youth had convinced me that it was worth going to college and getting a white collar job, this experience would have done it. I sometimes think of it as my Scarlet O'Hara moment—with a little variation. I didn't think "As God is my witness, I'll never be hungry again!" I thought more along the lines of "As God is my witness, I'll never pick cotton again!" And I haven't!